

(X) ↓ aphorisms
3/18/96

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Dr Joshua Lederberg
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*responded
email*

Dear Dr. Lederberg:

In going through some papers which were filed a long time ago, I came upon a xerox I had made for you, together with a note. I cannot understand how it got filed and not sent and can only plead the lack of secretary.

I apologize for the long time it has taken me to reply to your query. Perhaps in the meanwhile you will have found a better answer than mine. Let me remind you of your query to me.

You asked me specifically about the source of a quotation attributed to Alexander von Humboldt by Sam Morison to the effect that detractors who don't like to give others credit for having made an original discovery first say it is an error and then that it was plagiarized, so that the discoverer finds he is said to have been a plagiary (or plagiarist) "for trifles."

Let me say at once that I never found an attribution of this to Humboldt. I do, however, have a pre-Humboldt source. In fact, this is one of my favorite quotations.

With regard to Humboldt, I must tell you that I never found it in my reading of Humboldt. Of course, he may not have written it in a published work or in a letter. He may simply have uttered it in a conversation or a lecture.

If, however, Humboldt did say or write this "bon mot" somewhere, he almost certainly would not have originated it since it was already in circulation by his times.

I should tell you that I was particularly interested in your query because I know a source from which it would have to Humboldt either through his reading or conversation. In fact, I quote this quite often because it is so true to life.

Perhaps you have actually been successful in tracing this to something Humboldt wrote or was reported to have said. If so, I should be very interested to learn your findings. Or perhaps you yourself have found a pre-Humboldt source. I should be glad, in such event, to learn whether or not your source is the same as mine.

<<Dr. Lederberg--page two>>

My source is a letter written by Benjamin Franklin to John Lining, in which he does say more or less what you (and Sam Morison) attribute to Humboldt.

I enclose a xerox of the Franklin text.

This was not merely a private letter, and so not generally known. Rather this letter was printed by Franklin in both the fourth and fifth editions of his book on electricity and was translated into French in the 1773 French edition of his book. Thus it was part of the book on *Experiments on Electricity* which I edited and published many years ago--in fact, my first book.

We know that Franklin was widely read and widely quoted (e.g., "the new born baby" quip about what good is a new discovery, picked up by Faraday). And so perhaps Humboldt found it not in Franklin, but in some source that quoted him.

Frankly, however, knowing Humboldt's tastes, it is very likely that he would have read Franklin's book, either in one of the English editions or in the French translation.

The shift of attribution from Franklin to Humboldt is an example of a rather common occurrence then and now. Good "bon mots" are always attributed to later celebrities, famous men and women. For example both Emerson and Carlyle (in a number of different works) wrote that history is a collection of biographies. Recently, I was sent a query, asking where Winston Churchill had said this. My colleague had just heard this Churchillean attribution on a TV biography program. Perhaps Churchill did say it, but if so he no doubt encountered it directly or at some remove from Carlyle.

And, as I have mentioned above, some form of "What good is a new born baby" is often attributed to Faraday--even though Faraday said that he was quoting Franklin.

Similarly, in the case of this saying, some one might have merely pinned it onto Humboldt or Humboldt may have picked it and used it without knowing or referring to the source in Franklin.

It is, of course, also possible that Franklin did not invent this. That is, he might in turn have picked it up from something he read or heard or possibly he adapted it from some expression he had encountered. In any event, it is--as I believe you will admit--very Franklinian.

As of now, however, there is no doubt that this goes back to Franklin and, so far as I know, there is no predecessor.

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<<Dr, Joshua Lederberg, page three>>

To shift now to another entirely different subject, let me ask you whether it is possible for me to get a complete list of your own publications that deal with conditions of scientific discovery. I know that you wrote one such paper in collaboration with Harriet Zuckerman. And I have a recollection of one that appeared in Nature.

Of course, should you have any reprints of these papers available, I should be glad and honored to receive them.

If you should have a complete bibliography of your publications, I should be most grateful to have it. I could then run through it and pick out those items which deal either with your reflections on your own discoveries or the general topic of discoveries--especially the theme of being "before" their time, etc.

I have a fond recollection that we first made contact many years ago, when you were at the University of Wisconsin (as I recollect) and wrote me for the source of a quotation.

let me conclude with another expression of my deep regret that it has taken me so long to reply to your query.

Cordially yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "I. Bernard Cohen", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

I. Bernard Cohen

Victor S. Thomas Professor (emeritus) of the
History of Science, Harvard University

P.S. I am interested in your writings because I am at present engaged in a study of creativity and conditions of discovery.

Benjamin Franklin to Dr. John Lining

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so undertake to explain every thing, often remain long ignorant of many things that others could and would instruct them in, if they appeared less conceited.

The treatment your friend has met with is so common, that no man who knows what the world is, and ever has been, should expect to escape it. There are every where a number of people, who, being totally destitute of any inventive faculty themselves, do not readily conceive that others may possess it: They think of inventions as of miracles; there might be such formerly, but they are ceased. With these, every one who offers a new invention is deemed a pretender: He had it from some other country, or from some book: A man of *their own acquaintance*; one who has no more sense than themselves, could not possibly, in their opinion, have been the inventor of any thing. They are confirmed, too, in these sentiments, by the frequent instances of pretensions to invention, which vanity is daily producing. That vanity too, though an incitement to invention, is, at the same time, the pest of inventors. Jealousy and Envy deny the merit or the novelty of your invention; but Vanity, when the novelty and merit are established, claims it for its own. The smaller your invention is, the more mortification you receive in having the credit of it disputed with you by a rival, whom the jealousy and envy of others are ready to support against you, at least so far as to make the point doubtful. It is not in itself of importance enough for a dispute; no one would think your proofs and reasons worth their attention: And yet if you do not dispute the point, and demonstrate your right, you not only lose the credit of being in that instance *ingenious*, but you suffer the disgrace of not being *ingenuous*; not only of being a plagiary but of being a plagiary for trifles. Had the invention been greater it would have disgraced you less; for men have not so contemptible an idea of him that robs for gold on the highway, as of him that can pick pockets for half-pence and farthings. Thus

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through Envy, Jealousy, and the Vanity of competitors for Fame, the origin of many of the most extraordinary inventions, though produced within but a few centuries past, is involved in doubt and uncertainty. We scarce know to whom we are indebted for the *compass*, and for *spectacles*, nor have even *paper* and *printing*, that record every thing else, been able to preserve with certainty the name and reputation of their inventors. One would not, therefore, of all faculties, or qualities of the mind, wish, for a friend, or a child, that he should have that of invention. For his attempts to benefit mankind in that way, however well imagined, if they do not succeed, expose him, though very unjustly, to general ridicule and contempt; and, if they do succeed, to envy, robbery, and abuse.

I am, &c.

B. F.
